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AUTHOR Crandall, JoAnn
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ABSTRACT

Characteristics of successful adult vocational English as a second language (ESL) programs are described, and psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and pedagogical insights are presented. Characteristics of a successful program are as follows: (1) they are learner-centered; (2) there is recognition that English can and should be learned for specific functions and domains; (3) behavioral objectives are specified that are job related and appropriate materials are used; (4) the vocational ESL program is embedded in a good vocational program; (5) the program is functional in nature; (6) there is recognition of the value of vocabulary in the job context; (7) the program builds on skills the adult already has; and (8) there is recognition of cross-cultural differences, especially those relating to education and language learning. Future research needs include: data-gathering of the actual language used in occupational situations, determination of what really matters among the various language skills, evaluation of existing materials and programs in vocational ESL and adult ESL in general, and more assessment of learner needs. (SW)

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PRACTICAL AND THEORETICAL CONCERNS IN ADULT VOCATIONAL ESL:

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAMS

JoAnn (Jodi) Crandall
Center for Applied Linguistics

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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At the National Indochinese Clearinghouse/Technical Assistance Center (NIC/TAC), we have been providing technical assistance, information collection and dissemination, and materials development for the Indochinese Refugee Assistance Projects around the country. Since 1976, our principal concern has been providing assistance and materials for the adult refugees, helping projects to develop an educational program which combines English language classes with prevocational or vocational training to enable the refugees to get a job (or a better job), to keep that job, and to advance in that job.

Although successful vocational ESL programs may vary, they share a number of characteristics. The purpose of this paper is to identify or describe some of these characteristics and to indicate the psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, or pedagogical insights which these reflect. At this point, it is impossible to really define the occupational language needs of either the native English speaker or the limited English speaker, but intuition, introspection, and feedback from vocational teachers and supervisors, as well as the adult learners themselves, have given us a direction worthy of further research. After describing successful vocational ESL programs, I'll outline some future research needs.

While the discussion which follows emerges principally from experience with Indochinese programs, I believe much of it is relevant for bilingual vocational or vocational ESL programs for other linguistic and cultural groups as well.

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WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAMS?

THE SUCCESSFUL VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAM IS LEARNER-CENTERED

Too often in ESL programs, practical considerations such as where classes will be held, at what times, and with what teachers and texts. These overshadow what must be the first question of any program: that is, what are the learner's needs, not only for English, but what social, psychological, and economic needs must be met first before the adult can seriously concentrate on acquiring English? A program must help the adult to find social services, medical care, child care, and economic help. It must provide transportation and child care while the adult is studying English. More important, it must create an ESL program which the adult will consider valuable and relevant: it must provide access to a job and teach the English which is necessary to get that job. It must truly be vocational ESL. It must offer classes at a time when adults can take them and it should locate these even in job settings, if that is possible.

THE SUCCESSFUL VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAM RECOGNIZES THAT ENGLISH CAN AND SHOULD BE LEARNED FOR SPECIFIC FUNCTIONS AND DOMAINS

It may come as a shock to many of us, but it is possible to survive in the United States without speaking English. It is possible to shop, to attend religious ceremonies, to carry on home life and neighborhood activities all in the native tongue. For those times when it might be necessary to use English, a child (who is rapidly acquiring English) or a bilingual neighbor can interpret or translate. To try to teach the refugee a general ESL

course is to engage him in learning much more English than he may want or need. Sociolinguists (Fishman 1968, 1972; Gumperz 1970; Blom and Gumperz 1972) have recognized that we can and do use different language codes or different styles of the same language for different purposes. We can and do vary our styles or code-switch to express social distance or solidarity, to express a particular emotional state, to talk about an intimate or public topic. In multilingual situations, a bilingual may use one language for the home, the neighborhood, and the church and another language for school and employment. Part of being a member of a speech community and having communicative competence is being able to vary one's speech according to shifts in participants, topics, settings, and ends (Hymes 1964, 1972).

The proliferation of acronyms and fields in ESOL attests to that. Where once there was only English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), there now are ESP (English for Specific or Special Purposes -- the English of medicine, law, engineering, or economics); EST (English for Science and Technology); EIIL (English as an International and Intranational Language -- the English of diplomacy or official use); and Vocational or Occupational ESL (including Prevocational or Job Survival ESL). Even the traditional EFL program on college campuses is being redefined in terms of English for Academic Purposes (study skills, taking lecture notes, reading textbooks) and more specific EST or ESP. General ESL courses continue to exist, but few adults are willing to sit through the number of hours and years required to get a general knowledge of the language. Instead, while these specialized English courses still teach the structure of English, they focus on specific vocabulary and relevant structures and contexts for presenting English.

Anyone who has attempted to master another language as an adult can attest to its frustrating and often tedious nature. Few adults (except maybe

linguists) are willing to study another language for the sheer pleasure of it. However, if an adult can see the relevance of the English class to his own goals, he will find the frustration bearable. A good vocational ESL program recognizes that built-in motivation and uses job motivation as the organizing principle of the ESL program. Lambert has identified two types of motivation for acquiring another language: integrative and instrumental (Gardner and Lambert 1972). For most adults, the desire to "integrate" or "acculturate" -- that is, the desire to adopt the identity, values, beliefs of another culture or to lose one's "foreign" nature -- is not present. Their motivation, instead, is to acquire a language because it will enable them to get something: a better education, a better job, or whatever. Vocational ESL recognizes the potential strength of instrumental motivation.

For the Indochinese refugees, many of whom retain hopes of returning to their homelands, integrative motivation simply doesn't apply. In fact, these refugees want to retain the values, beliefs, and attitudes of their own culture, while adapting to the United States in those areas where it is most necessary: in school and on the job. The "affective filter" is a principal stumbling block for successful language acquisition in adults. This affective filter -- fear of failure, fear of loss of identity, frustration -- is what characterizes adult language acquisition problems. Children acquire a second language easily because they need to, because they are willing to take risks and make mistakes in order to fulfill their intellectual and social needs. Adults are more cautious, perhaps because they have more to lose. Vocational ESL can recognize the often threatening nature of language learning and take away some of that potential threat by focusing the language classes upon a segment or domain of experience -- the occupation -- and leaving other domains intact for the first language and culture. A respect for the adult's needs and situation are inherent in any good vocational ESL program.

THE SUCCESSFUL VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAM SPECIFIES BEHAVIORAL OBJECTIVES THAT ARE JOB RELATED AND USES APPROPRIATE MATERIALS TO ACHIEVE THESE

In order to create a relevant vocational ESL program, it is necessary to assess the language demands of the job as carefully as possible. That means, one must talk with vocational teachers, with supervisors, with other limited English speaking adults who have trained for these jobs or are currently working at them, and also consult vocational texts and written materials used on the job. These will provide a framework for the situations or contexts in which the language will be used. If one can audio-tape actual language, making certain to tape interactions with fellow workers, with the supervisor or boss, and with customers or clients, one is even better prepared to create vocational ESL materials which are authentic and which will enable the adult to function appropriately on the job.

Ideally, the ESL classes should be vocational: that is, the English should be specifically that needed by a clerk-typist or an auto mechanic. However, few Indochinese programs (or any adult ESL program) have enough adults who are pursuing the same vocation to enable the program to offer job-specific language classes. Where this is possible, it is the best approach. However, all adults who are immigrants or refugees need to acquire a general prevocational English: they need to be able to read the want ads, to fill in application forms, to participate in job interviews, in short, to survive on the job. The ESL materials must reflect these job survival skills and must help the adults to acquire the terminal job survival behaviors which have been identified in the needs assessment.

Unfortunately, many of the adult ESL programs share misconceptions about what ESL is. Some are using literacy materials, assuming that not speaking a language and not being able to read are synonymous. It's true that some of the Indochinese refugees (especially the Hmongs) are illiterate, but that's

a different problem from being unable to speak English. If an adult doesn't know the meaning of a Social Security Card, all the practice in decoding those words will be meaningless. Good programs are teaching English and literacy (in the native language or in English) but they are not assuming that it's the same thing. Nor have they made the mistake of assuming that a person who can't read English is automatically illiterate. For the Indochinese programs, where some cultural groups have greater problems with pronunciation and other cultural groups have greater problems in reading (either because they have used a different alphabet or they have not acquired literacy), it is possible to divide the ESL class for part of the time to practice pronunciation with the one group while the other is practicing with the alphabet or being given literacy training.

Other programs assume that the needs of the limited English speaker are the same as the under-educated in this country and, unfortunately, use Adult Basic Education materials with the refugees. However, ABE materials stress the wrong things. They focus on reading and writing, as well as on computation, and often require the student to interact with a book or a programmed text or an impersonal machine for long periods of time. What the limited English speaker needs, however, is substantial interaction with other speakers and practice using the language, understanding it and speaking it. A limited English speaker does not need basic skills training: he needs practice with the English language.

Programs which group all adults into a General ESL program are also making a mistake. This kind of program wastes time, teaches needless vocabulary, and involves contexts which are all wrong. Rather than taking advantage of the situations which occupations provide and structuring the presentation to the vocabulary and particular language phrases of the job, the General ESL program requires adults to have faith that the program will eventually

become relevant to their needs.

THE SUCCESSFUL VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAM IS EMBEDDED IN A GOOD VOCATIONAL PROGRAM

Besides structuring the ESL classes to the specific vocational demands, the vocational ESL program also provides job counseling, job developing, and continued English classes even after the adult has found a job, combining the English classes with on-the-job training whenever possible.

A common tendency is to postpone the vocational training until the adult has acquired a high enough level of English proficiency (often the level to pass the GED). The problem with this approach is that it takes too long, especially for people who have heavy financial burdens and who need to get employment as soon as possible. A better approach is one in which even the early ESL is prevocational in nature. If the program permits, bilingual aides or teachers can facilitate the transition from the language class to the vocational class. A bilingual aide can preview the content to be taught in the vocational class and then review it after the class.

Where bilingual aides are not available, the ESL teachers and vocational teachers can work as a team, identifying the contexts and language demands for a set of classes. This requires coordination, but results in an integrated program. If a team approach isn't possible, then the prevocational ESL can precede actual vocational or on-the-job training.

An exact formula doesn't exist for the percentage of ESL and vocational training at the various stages in the program, but clearly at the beginning, the focus must be more on English (though contextualized to job survival) and toward the end, it must be more on the vocation.

Successful programs take full advantage of bilingual support and use the native language in outreach (identifying the adults in need of the program and helping them to find out about and become enrolled in the program), in

orientation (to the ESL program, to social services available, to American life in general), in counseling (occupational as well as more basic psychological counseling), and in supporting the vocational training through previewing and reviewing, providing bilingual glosses, and alerting the vocational teacher to differences in vocational practices in the learner's own country. The more homogeneous the group, the greater the possibility for bilingual support services and bilingual vocational programs. Where the class is less homogeneous, linguistically and culturally, the possibility of using a bilingual aide is lessened. However, whenever possible, providing first language assistance to the learner can make the difference in a program, creating a very successful program which adults will attend because they can get the wide variety of services they need there, not just the language classes.

THE SUCCESSFUL VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAM IS FUNCTIONAL IN NATURE

Sociolinguists have been telling us for some time that we use language to do things: to request information, to express opinions, to reveal social status and roles, to threaten, to insult, to command. Austin (How to Do Things with Words) and Searle (Speech Acts) have changed our conception of the basic unit of speech from the sentence to the speech act. They have revealed how the same sentence can carry a number of meanings and be used to perform a number of different acts. For example, the sentence "It's cold in here" can function as a warning to someone entering the room to go back and get a sweater, as a complaint, as a request to someone to close the window or start a fire, or as a simple statement of surprise. Similarly, we can use a number of different sentences to accomplish the same function. If I want a fellow employee to get me a file, I might say:

"Hey, Sally. Get me the Johnson file, OK?"

"Sally, could I have the Johnson file?"
"Miss Friedkin, I need the Johnson file."
"Do you think I could borrow the Johnson file for a few hours, Miss Friedkin?"

Obviously, the last two requests are more formal and less direct. I am undoubtedly in an inferior position in the office to Miss Friedkin (she might be the office manager, for example, and I only a secretary). In the first two requests, however, Sally is either at the same level as I or we're at least social peers on the job.

In acquiring our first language, we learn not only the rules of the language (grammatical competence), but we also learn how to use the language appropriately in different situations, with different participants, when talking about different topics, etc. That is, we acquire communicative competence: the knowledge of the rules of interaction and interpretation of our own speech community. We know that we don't say, "Gimme that" to our teachers; nor do we say "Would you be so kind as to allow me to borrow that" to our friends.

However, most language classrooms have not addressed that issue and have neglected to provide contexts to enable the second language learner to practice functioning in different contexts with the language. Audiolingual methodology, which arose during World War II and served as the basis for all language teaching for decades following that, focused upon teaching language as a set of patterns or combinations of discrete elements, requiring learners to practice often meaningless, mechanical drills until the language pattern became habitual or unconscious. Behaviorist in orientation, audiolingual approaches to language teaching attempted to limit the learner's use of the language to only those patterns which had been adequately practiced, in an attempt to keep the learner from making mistakes or worse, practicing these mistakes. However, what too often happened is that students would leave the classroom, presumably having mastered a pattern, only to find that when given the opportunity to use the

language, they could no longer do so. What they seem to have learned is language-like behavior. When they had sufficient time, they could conjugate the verbs and review the rules and then use the language, but rarely did they have the time and the risk of making mistakes was too great.

Recognizing the problems with this approach (while still using it considerably in class), other methodologies arose, but these shared a fundamental point of view with audiolingualism: they focused on how to teach the language, on the methodology, instead of what to teach or more important, what the learner needed to learn. Not enough meaningful interaction--role plays, dialogues, communicative drills--were available to the class. Utilizing Hymes' conception of communicative competence, attempts were made to create more situational or communicative materials. These usually involved the addition of the meaningful interaction indicated above and the contextualization of the entire lesson: for example, going grocery shopping, opening a checking account, using the card catalogue, etc. The organizing principle for the ESL class, then, became a situation or context.

Recently, however, the recognition of the functional nature of language has evoked interest in a course organized around the various ways we use language. For example, the Council of Europe's Threshold Level has identified six broad categories of functions: we use language to express emotions, to socialize, to express intellectual attitudes, to get things done, to express moral attitudes, as well as to give and seek information (Van Ek 1975, 1976; Wilkins 1976). Too often in the past it was the last function which the classroom focused on; the teacher asked the questions and the student answered them, or the students would ask each other the questions. The language classroom was primarily concerned with narrating or reporting, but paid little attention to the other uses of language. This is a serious shortcoming, since

what it results in is a learner who has acquired a register of language appropriate only to the classroom. In trying to find a context in which the usual "This is a book" might be functional, I can only envision someone speaking to a foreigner or limited English speaker. Even the attempt to situationalize it, for example with "This is a wrench", is only appropriate for someone talking to the limited English speaker, perhaps clarifying a mistaken label for the tool. However, were this embedded in a request for clarification -- "This is a wrench, isn't it? -- or "Did you say, 'This is a wrench'"? -- the utterance becomes more functional and infinitely more relevant to the learner. That is not to say that the structures of English need not be taught; it is merely to emphasize that they can be taught in a way which renders them useful and relevant to the learner.

Although a number of syllabuses which are notional or functional in nature have been proposed, we really don't know all the uses to which language is put. We can only intuit them. However, we can find out which ones are causing the most problem for the adult and teach accordingly. For the Indochinese refugee, a repeated report from supervisors and vocational teachers is that the Indochinese "can't follow directions." What that really seems to mean, however, is that the Indochinese have not found a way to request clarification which also allows them to save face. Instead of using a direct "I don't understand that" or "Repeat that, please" which they may have heard in class, they need practice in indirect requests for clarification:

"Was that 5 copies you wanted?"
"That was 5 copies, wasn't it?"
"How many copies did you say you wanted?"
"F-i-v-e copies?"

First language acquisition involves increasingly indirect and sophisticated means of achieving our end. In a one-hour board meeting recently, 14 requests for clarification were made, all of them with some sort of face-saving indirectness.

Another function which needs to be taught is the use of language to establish social ties or solidarity. For the Indochinese or any adult in a vocational ESL program, that roughly translates as the ability to make small talk; that is, to talk about the weather, about traffic conditions, about what one did over the weekend or on a vacation, or about sports. These routin interactions at the Xerox machine, at the water fountain, during lunch hour or coffee breaks, and before and after work usually involve no more than one or two exchanges. For example:

"Did ya have a good weekend?"
"It was O.K. How about you?"
"All we did was watch TV."

The Gambits materials produced by the Public Service Commission in Canada are useful here, especially at providing the kind of conversational skills which native speakers acquire: the ability to enter conversations, to know when a turn is ending, to exit from conversations, and to interrupt. Some children never seem to acquire these rules in their first language and have trouble in school because of that. Clearly most second language classes have ignored these, but they are critical for enabling one to get along with his peers, or his superiors.

Moreover, adults need to learn to vary their language to meet the particular situation: they need access to different registers for use with the boss during work and when socializing, for talking with customers and talking with fellow workers. Only sufficient oral/aural practice in interacting in the language in appropriate contexts will enable the adult to leave the class able to function appropriately on the job in English. The strength of the language classroom is that it provides a sheltered context for practicing that language, where mistakes are not met with such dire consequences. As Krashen has pointed out, the classroom can simulate for the second language learner what the mother has done for the first language

learner: it can create an environment in which the teacher acts as caretaker, repeating, keeping the language understandable and either at or just beyond the learner's grasp, and providing lots of communicative practice for the adult to enable him to induce the rules of the language.

Oral/aural practice is particularly important for those adults who have had substantial grammar-translation classes in the language or whose education level is sufficient for them to have acquired substantial reading and writing skills. They need the opportunity to speak the language, to practice without fear of losing face. The sheltered classroom environment is perfect for that.

THE SUCCESSFUL VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAM RECOGNIZES THE VALUE OF VOCABULARY IN THE JOB CONTEXT

Although traditional audiolingual methodology kept vocabulary at a minimum while teaching the structure of a language, the increasing value of vocabulary, especially for adults, is being recognized. Krashen often remarks that if we were given a choice of a structure pill or a vocabulary pill which would instantly give us all of the structures of a language or all of the vocabulary, most of us would eagerly choose the vocabulary pill. Recently, Virginia French Allen in a workshop for ESL teachers said that the reluctance to teach vocabulary may have been wrong, since recent research reveals that people are rarely misunderstood because of a grammatical error, while they are often misunderstood when their error is in vocabulary. Moreover, as ESL teachers know, teachers of other subjects constantly complain that their limited English speaking students don't have the vocabulary to understand the lectures or the textbooks. For vocational students, this vocabulary is especially important. The adult needs to know the names of tools, of processes, of directions, of safety and health terms, and general job terms. He has to be able to follow directions, read manuals, and take orders.

He has to know the names of the things and the processes he uses. The auto mechanic has to be able to tell the customer what new parts he installed, why he installed them, and what other things he fixed. The clerk has to be able to take inventory, report the items which are needed, and fill out order forms.

THE SUCCESSFUL VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAM BUILDS ON SKILLS THE ADULT ALREADY HAS

It is fortunate that vocabulary learning is important for vocational ESL, since memorizing vocabulary lists is one thing adults do well. In fact, there are a number of skills which the adult brings to the language class which can help compensate for the frustration the adult feels when witnessing the relative ease with which his children are acquiring English. To begin with, the adult has cognitive development which the language class can build on. Problem-solving activities, transfer of literacy skills from his native language to English, and other intellectual skills can reduce the frustration at the problems of acquiring the phonological system of another language (of overcoming pronunciation problems).

Moreover, if the adult has worked in a similar capacity in his own country, these job skills can be built on in the ESL class. A bilingual aide can help clarify differences in the way the vocation is practiced here and the way it was practiced in the home country, but nonetheless, a great deal of the vocational experience and educational experience will transfer to the new environment. Using this transfer helps compensate for the loss of plasticity or flexibility which faces the adult second language student.

THE SUCCESSFUL VOCATIONAL ESL PROGRAM RECOGNIZES CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES, ESPECIALLY THOSE RELATING TO EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Adults bring to the language classroom a number of cultural preconceptions about education in general and language classes in particular. These involve who should attend school, what the role of the teacher should be, what class activities are appropriate, and what kind of separation there should be in the class. If the class is culturally homogeneous, the ESL teacher must become aware of the basic cognitive styles and learning strategies of that culture. If the class is heterogeneous, cultural sensitivity--the recognition that appropriate behavior varies across cultures--needs to be practiced by the teacher.

Indochinese adults generally view education as something for children in which the teacher provides the information for the students to repeat and memorize. The classroom is teacher-dominated, with students taking a passive role and demonstrating their learning by repeating the teacher's lessons on tests. The classroom is not an appropriate place of questioning the teacher, since that might be viewed as disrespectful; nor is it a place for individualized instruction or discussion. In addition, serious classes have homework and language classes, in particular, have lots of reading and writing assignments (grammar-translation is the principal methodology for language teaching). The Indochinese expect separation of social classes and a certain amount of separation of the sexes. Husbands and wives, especially, need to be separated if the wife is to participate in oral practice.

Recognition of these cultural practices and attitudes will help the vocational ESL program to work within the learner's traditions, at least at the beginning, and to gradually shift the learning to the interactive, paired, problem-solving activities which the adult will need to function on the job. If a class must assign homework to be considered serious, the teacher can see to it that homework assignments are given to practice reading and writing, leaving more class time for interaction activities.

SUMMARY

In short, the successful vocational ESL program is learner-centered, with clear functional objectives which are relevant to the vocational goals of the adult. It recognizes the need to focus only upon the structures, vocabulary, and situations demanded by the job (or the "world of work" in general, in a prevocational course). It provides an opportunity to practice using English appropriately in various job situations. It is embedded in a good vocational program and builds upon an adult's acquired skills, both occupational and more general cognitive ones. It respects the language and culture of the adult and eases the transition from the first language and culture to the new one.

FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

Although we have substantial anecdotal information and can rely upon our own intuitions and perceptions of occupational language demands with some certainty, little data-gathering of the actual language used in occupational situations has been done. We need micro-ethnographies, taping people on the job for some time to determine their language use. Moreover, we need to determine what differences exist for the native and the limited English speaker.

First, we need to establish what really matters among the various language skills. How important is pronunciation? the use of grammatically correct sentences? the ability to write in complete sentences? It is possible that these are the wrong questions. Perhaps we should be asking how important a particular language function is. What are the minimal functions for which someone must be able to use English on the job? in

what context? using what vocabulary and structures?

We also need more evaluation of existing materials and programs in vocational ESL (and adult ESL in general). We can identify and probably agree upon the successful vocational ESL program, but the hierarchy of variables (and the identification of other important variables) has never been established. Since we don't have that, we also don't have any good evaluation instruments for vocational ESL. After we identify what really matters, we can create specific materials and test to those materials.

We need much more assessment of learner needs. We need to talk with supervisors, employers, vocational teachers, and the learners themselves in a systematic way. Existing programs have made a good beginning, and in following their intuition and any feedback they have had, are certainly as relevant as any ESL program can be (if not more so, since the context and situation have been clearly defined from the start), but we need to know more.

Occupational literacy demand studies will give us some information about literacy demands of specific occupations and the strategies people use to avoid these demands. But occupational language demands transcend mere literacy; in fact, oral proficiency is undoubtedly much more important than the ability to read or write the language in many job situations. However, we can only verify that after we have done a great deal more research.

Until that time, the preceding discussion can serve as an index to the characteristics of successful vocational ESL programs, at least as they apply to the Indochinese refugees.

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